

## **A scathing critique of Da Vinci's famous painting**

What one might wonder when looking at French-born American Michael Duchamp's "readymade" piece of art, *L.H.O.O.Q.* is why he would do something so simple or be insulting such a "great" piece of art. This piece is something that anyone could do in their spare time. I could get a copy of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and draw a moustache and goatee on it. I ask two questions: why did Duchamp create this image? What was his purpose?

One must look at what some of his contemporaries are saying. They hated Da Vinci's painting because it was "no longer appreciated as a painting but [rather was]...commodified on postcards, posters and coffee mugs."<sup>1</sup> Still, many observers may think that giving the painting facial features consist of vandalism, insulting, vulgar, and is cheap to what people perceive as a beautiful piece of art. Such a perspective is missing the point of this piece all together. American abstract painter Barnett Newman responds to this claim, noting that "Those who put the mustache on Mona Lisa are not attacking it or art, but Leonardo da Vinci the man. What irritates them is that this man with half a dozen pictures has this great name in history, whereas, they, with their large oeuvre, aren't sure." I agree with this sentiment since I believe it is helpful in fending off common criticism of Duchamp's simple painting, but still it does not look at what the deeper meaning of this art is as a whole. One must remember that Duchamp is in the Dada school, a self-selecting group that creates counterculture, abstract, and absurd art that could be made by anyone. Such a belief is integral to the piece at hand since Duchamp's piece has a common medium, reducing the "great" *Mona Lisa* to the size of a postcard.

Still, what is the real purpose behind this piece? In a sense it's a throwaway piece not really worth anything monetary wise because it's a revolt against giving aesthetics things any sort of moneyed value. As a result, this piece of art looks at the "cherished" *Mona Lisa* in a different

---

1 Stamberg, S. (n.d.). Dada on Display at the National Gallery of Art : NPR. *NPR : National Public Radio : News & Analysis, World, US, Music & Arts : NPR*. Retrieved February 5, 2013, from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5191892>

context. Duchamp “drew a mustache and a thin goatee beard...forc[ing] the observer to see ordinary objects from new perspectives.”<sup>2</sup> Even the title has an interesting meaning, because it denotes a pun literally that when translated from French means “colloquially as “She is hot in the ass.”” With this sexualized reference, the work itself is still puzzling. While removing the Mona Lisa “from her ancient pedestal, it also...elevates the crude commercially printed card...to a signature work of art” and draws attention to “sexual ambiguity...in Leonardo's life and work,” especially his “supposed homosexuality...and...multi-sexual poses.” This means that the work, which changes Leonardo’s feminine icon into one that has masculine features, reface’s the work rather than defaces it as observers have claimed. Unlike the original, Duchamp’s use of a reproduction changed the brighter colors to shades of gray which to me makes the picture more appealing. It seems to pull you in more and like something anyone could do.

I still feel that there is much more to this image itself. What did Duchamp want to achieve other than revolting against the monetary value of aesthetics, what change did he see coming from the work and how will such a change become a reality? Some say it is challenges “the perception of what is real” and was part of rejection of “Victorian values and traditional expectations of art.”<sup>3</sup> But, what did the artist think? The piece, below the surface, is complex on many levels and has a clear purpose: “Duchamp wished to expose the foibles of art critics and historians by showing that he could so alter their most famous icon, and they would not notice so long as he distracted them”<sup>4</sup> with the facial hair. It is not noticeable from the beginning, but

---

2 Mona Lisa Images for a Modern World - 12. (n.d.). Robert A. Baron, *Topics: Copyright, Museum Computerization, Mona Lisa, Art History, Fine Arts Cataloging*. Retrieved February 5, 2013, from <http://www.studiolo.org/Mona/MONASV12.htm>

3 Associated Press. (n.d.). TweenTribune | News for Kids | Mona Lisa with a mustache and goatee | [tweentribune.com](http://tweentribune.com). *TweenTribune | News for Kids | Real life “Cabbage Patch Kid” earns \$1,000 | tweentribune.com*. Retrieved February 5, 2013, from <http://tweentribune.com/content/mona-lisa-mustache-and-goatee>

4 Shearer, R. R., & Gould, S. J. (n.d.). The Case of Duchamp and Poincaré / Symposium Articles. *MarcelDuchamp.org / Main Index*. Retrieved February 5, 2013, from

Duchamp's original piece is a composite of the face done by Leonardo and his own face. This makes the piece like many other Dada art. Furthermore, one must look back into Duchamp's history to see what his ideas revolved around: he "rejected all painting because it was made for the eye, not the mind...[and] found a different way to make his art impersonal—drawing like a mechanical engineer rather than an artist. He preferred mechanical drawing, he said, because "it's outside all pictorial convention"...[furthermore] Duchamp...saw in them [his "readymades"] yet another way to undermine conventional ideas about art."<sup>5</sup> To expand on the work itself, it functions as "a commentary on the relationship between artist and viewer," something which Duchamp wanted since the piece could be referring to his friend Guillaume Apollinaire who "was falsely detained in connection with the theft of the *Mona Lisa* and some small sculptures from the Louvre several years" before this piece was made.<sup>6</sup> From this, it seems that Duchamp clearly wanted a way of challenging established thinking of the art community about a "cherished" painting and what people normally, traditionally call "art."

One may still wonder: who was affected by such a painting? I would say the art community and the public as a whole. After this piece was put out there, people began to think different of art. The technique is simple to do, with an overlaid face and drawn-in facial features. If one was inspired by this piece and not offended by its "insulting" nature, then maybe they could become a Dadaist too, realizing that anything is art and anyone could be an artist.

---

<http://www.marcelduchamp.org/symposium/article1letter.html>

5 Trachtman, P. (n.d.). Dada, "The Irreverent Rowdy Revolution". *California State University, Dominguez Hills*. Retrieved February 5, 2013, from <http://www.csudh.edu/dearhabermas/dadasmithsonian01bk.htm>

6 L.H.O.O.Q.. (n.d.). *Tout-Fait: Marcel Duchamp Studies Online journal*. Retrieved February 5, 2013, from [http://www.toutfait.com/unmaking\\_the\\_museum/LHOOQ.html](http://www.toutfait.com/unmaking_the_museum/LHOOQ.html)

Michael Duchamp's piece *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) [on the left] next to Da Vinci's original [on the right]

